

Greece loosens coronavirus lockdown, massively rearms military

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Despite the dangerous spread of the new virus mutations and the deadly development of the pandemic throughout Europe, Greece is easing its lockdown measures. On 11 January, elementary schools and daycare centers reopened, followed last Monday by retail stores, hairdressers and beauty salons.

Citizen Protection Minister Michalis Chrysochoidis, who had the relaxations accompanied by an increased police presence, justified the move, saying, “If we continue with the strict bans, we will destroy ourselves financially and psychologically.” By this he does not at all mean the losses to small business owners and workers who have received almost no financial support during the lockdown. Rather, Chrysochoidis is concerned about the profits of the ruling class, for which his government will accept a renewed increase in the COVID-19 death rate without batting an eye.

With the partial opening, the social plight of workers and employees in the private sector is being used as a battering ram. In a recent survey conducted by the Alco Institute for the Private Sector Trade Union Confederation (GSEE), 56 percent of respondents said they had lost income during the pandemic, and 22 percent even had wage cuts of more than 31 percent, which has major consequences given Greece’s low wages. The majority of respondents, 60 percent, have not been able to work from home, exposing themselves to the risk of infection at work. More than half of those surveyed are pessimistic about the coming months, with nearly 40 percent unsure whether they will be able to keep their jobs.

The government has the backing of the nominal opposition party, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), in its policy of opening up the economy. Party leader Alexis Tsipras, who himself saw to the interests of the economic and financial oligarchy for four years as prime minister, expressed his support for looser restrictions for retail. He troubled himself to deliver a few platitudes, such as calling for more financial aid and higher health spending, but from his mouth this is nothing but hot air. In December, Syriza was criticized when it demanded a coronavirus bonus for the police—incidentally

just after the anniversary of the murder of the teenager Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a policeman in 2008.

In the media, the drumbeat for the rapid reopening of schools is already rising. This is a “priority,” Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (ND) declared Tuesday. The target date is the first of February.

Scientific advisers to the Health Ministry were given targeted press coverage to justify the relaxations. Charalampos Gogos, professor of pathology and infectious disease research at the University of Patras and member of the government’s special committee, rehashed the old lie that school openings pose the least epidemiological risk because “young people carry lower viral loads than other groups.” He also advocated opening ski resorts and soon, restaurants.

The argument used to justify the relaxations is the initial fall in official infection rates in Greece, a result of the weeks-long lockdown and little testing. Last Monday, state television spoke of a “stable” epidemiological situation, concealing the fact that Monday’s figures of 237 new infections were accompanied by exceptionally low testing numbers of only about 3,700 PCR tests and 4,500 rapid tests. A day later, on Tuesday, the testing rate tripled as did infections, which went up to 566. The number of patients on ventilators also remains consistently high at around 300. So far, at least 32 people in Greece have tested positive with the new UK COVID-19 mutation.

Overall, more than 5,600 people have already died from the virus in the country of about 11 million people. The deadliest months were November and December, with up to 120 victims a day. According to the Greek statistics office Elstat, mortality in these months has increased by 30 to 40 percent compared to the previous year. The 48th and 49th weeks of last year (November 23-December 6) set a sad record with about 3,300 deaths each.

In view of the dramatic situation in neighboring European countries, the propaganda of a “stable” COVID-19 situation in Greece is not only deceptive, but extremely dangerous. The government is deliberately trying to downplay the

pandemic, even though more than 200,000 people are infected in Europe every day and more than 6,000 people die from COVID-19.

The underfunded and understaffed public health system, which has almost collapsed in recent months and had to make triage decisions, continues to hang by a thread. The vaccination campaign which began in Greece at the same time as other EU countries in late December is making slow progress, as it has almost everywhere in the world. As of January 23, only 154,273 people had been vaccinated. The first group included people over 85, health workers and government and party leaders. On Friday, Greece started to vaccinate the second group that includes people in the age of 80 until 84.

Under these strained conditions, the government is placing the entire burden of the vaccination campaign on the existing public health system. Instead of investing the necessary sums to ensure enough staff and equipment in the largest mass vaccination campaign in history, it announced Wednesday that public health centers will be transformed into vaccination centers. In Greece, health centers perform an important function in relieving hospitals and providing better outpatient health care. If they take over vaccinations now, they will no longer be able to provide that vital service.

An angry statement from the Association of Hospital Doctors of Greece (OENGE) says: “With which staff exactly are the vaccination centers to be staffed, for which a 12-hour shift is planned? With exhausted hospital staff? With endless hours of intensive overtime work to fill the huge gaps that are increasing with the thousands of people in the health workforce getting sick? With employees who haven’t had a vacation in months? With which doctors? Will a doctor treat COVID-19 patients one day and vaccinate healthy citizens the next?” Physicians criticize the continuing lack of new hires and the missing infrastructure to safely implement vaccinations.

The shortage and exhaustion of doctors and nurses and the deliberate neglect of public health in a pandemic seems like madness, but it is calculation. Instead of fighting the coronavirus, the government agenda for the new year focuses on arming the police and military apparatus.

This is even evident in the vaccination campaign itself: The surplus vaccine doses, which are in danger of spoiling because of missed vaccination appointments, are to be administered not to vaccination personnel, workers, teachers or young people on the evening of a day of vaccinations, but—to soldiers and police officers, as Mitsotakis announced on Tuesday.

In mid-December, Parliament passed the 2021 budget, which includes a drastic increase in military spending and a reduction in health spending. The defense budget will

increase by a third—from 3.4 billion euro last year to 5.5 billion this year. The total rearmament plan for the next few years is 11.5 billion euro. Among other things, Greece is purchasing 18 French “Rafale” fighter jets, four new frigates and four American “Seahawk” helicopters.

The health budget, on the other hand, has been cut from 4.83 billion euro (2020) to 4.26 billion (2021). Only 131 million euro are budgeted for the fight against the pandemic (786 million last year). With only 5 percent of its gross domestic product, Greece spends the least on health compared with other EU countries. Now another 572 million will be cut.

The unity of the ruling class is also visible in the government’s war policy. While the budget was passed with the votes of the ruling party, an increased majority of 189 deputies voted in favor of the military budget, including Syriza. The government also announced the extension of the military service from 9 to 12 months starting this May and to increase the army to 133,000 soldiers—an expansion of about 30 percent.

Domestically, the ruling class continues its authoritarian policies against the working class and is preparing for a storm of social opposition. Citizen Protection Minister Chrysochoidis, to whom the police report, and Education Minister Niki Kerameos have introduced a joint bill to establish a campus police force in universities. It would be empowered to make arrests, initiate proceedings and refer them to the prosecutor’s office. The police officers will not carry weapons but will carry batons and handcuffs. Their goal is to intimidate and persecute leftist students and student organizations. Chrysochoidis spoke of “a minority in the universities” spreading “terror.”

There is strong opposition to the new university policing law. On Thursday, students took to the streets in Athens and several other cities. “Students are not criminals!” was written on their banners. Teachers, parents and school students also participated. In Thessaloniki, riot police used batons and tear gas against the demonstrators.

The attacks on students are a serious warning, especially against the backdrop of Greek history. The fall of the military dictatorship, which ruled from 1967 to 1974 with US support, began with the uprising at the Athens Polytechnic University and was bloodily suppressed on November 17, 1973.



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